

Elaine J. Coates & Wikipedia: Defining Subjectivity

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INTRODUCTION

In May 2020, The University of Maryland, College Park’s Special Collections and University Archives (SCUA) launched a project to create Wikipedia pages for archival collections that meet the website’s notability requirements. In order to do this, three female student workers and myself created profiles and became Wikipedia editors, soon learning that 90% of Wikipedians are male. The male-female editor imbalance likely contributes to a site-wide underrepresented coverage of women-as-Wikipedia-subjects¹, particularly for women of color.

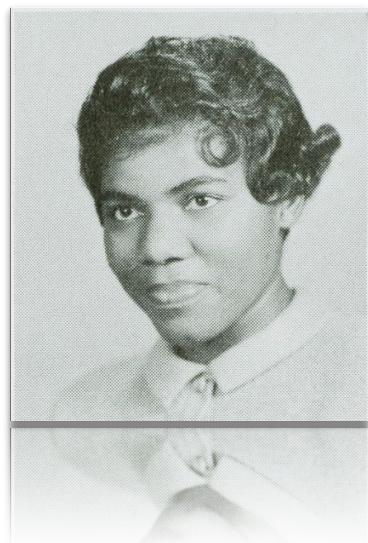
Wikipedia’s Notability Guidelines:

The notability guidelines are vague, only indicating that subjects must have “significant coverage” from three verifiable sources². This means the editor may only use reliable published sources rather than original research when creating a new page. These guidelines are also subjective, any editor may flag a page citing that the subject does not meet notoriety.

AIM

Elaine J. Coates:

Ms. Coates was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1937. Following *Brown V Board of Education*, Coates wrote her own recommendation letter and enrolled in the University of Maryland, graduating in 1959 as the first African American woman to earn a degree from the University. Despite the hardships and discrimination she faced during her four years from faculty and students, she went on to teach and earn her masters in social work³. The University plans to name a residence hall after her to honor her achievements⁴.



Senior Photo of Elaine Johnson
University of Maryland. *The Terrapin*
(1959). University of Maryland: College
Park, Maryland. page 379. UPUB
S36.002

METHODS

After learning the significance of Ms. Coates’ accomplishments and finding several sources that covered her life, I decided to create a Wikipedia page for her in July 2020.

Original Published Wikipedia Page

Elaine J. Coates

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia


This is an old revision of this page, as edited by Bellstran (talk | contribs) at 18:27, 20 July 2020 (added a heading for the references section). The present address (URL) is a permanent link to this revision, which may differ significantly from the current revision.
(diff) ← Previous revision | Latest revision (diff) | Newer revision → (diff)

Elaine J. Coates (1937-) is the first African American woman to graduate from the University of Maryland.

Elaine Coates was born in [Baltimore, Maryland](#) on September the 15th, 1937. Daughter of a domestic worker and railroad porter, she attended the then segregated Fredrick Douglass High School. Following [Brown V. Board of Education](#) Supreme Court ruling, Coates enrolled in the University of Maryland in 1955 where she was one of the few African American undergraduates allowed to live on campus^[1]. Her high school counselor refused to write Coates a letter of recommendation suggesting she find a job instead; at her mother’s urging, Coates wrote her own letter, ultimately earning a four-year scholarship. She resided in Caroline Hall and would frequently receive threats and insults, and frequently received unfair treatment from her professors. Coates graduated in 1959 from the College of Education^[2].

Coates went on to become a social worker and educator.

 This article was nominated for [deletion](#) on 23 July 2020. The result of [the discussion](#) was **keep**.

 This page was [proposed for deletion](#) by [Jerodlycett \(talk · contribs\)](#) on 21 July 2020.

This article must adhere to the **biographies of living persons** (BLP) policy, even if it is not a biography, because it contains material about living persons. Contentious material about living persons that is unsourced or [poorly sourced](#) **must be removed immediately** from the article and its talk page, especially if potentially [libellous](#). If such material is repeatedly inserted, or if you have other concerns, please report the issue to [this noticeboard](#).

If you are a subject of this article, or acting on behalf of one, and you need help, please see [this help page](#).

Using an official University write-up, an article from the *Baltimore Sun*, a blogpost from SCUA, and her archival collection, I created a short page for her totalling one paragraph. The page primarily noted that she was the first African-American woman to graduate from the University.

Three days later, the page was flagged and and nominated for deletion, citing that Ms. Coates did not meet Wikipedia’s notoriety standards namely because the cited sources were from oral histories and the singular University from which she earned her degree.

The initial flagging was met with support from other Wikipedia editors. One editor wrote on Coates’ talk page:

“[I am] currently neutral on this one. I don’t think that being the first African-American woman to graduate from a given university is a strong enough claim to notability to override a lack of substantial independent sourcing.”

Three others agreed with this editor and voted to delete the page.

RESULTS

Throughout this debate taking place on Ms. Coates’ talk page, I was advised to refrain from the discussion by another editor; since I was the creator of the page in question, I would naturally be in favor of keeping the page up. I watched the talk page for the next three days as more “delete” votes came in. On July 26, a Wikipedia editor refuted the initial flag stating:

“This is a perfect example of how subjective [these] discussions are: we like to pretend they are based on objective measures of significant coverage in reliable sources, but when a topic comes along...where we don’t think the subject should be notable because she’s just another black woman who had to struggle, we get comments like the ones above saying that the coverage is somehow not significant.”

The editor continued by listing a number of athlete pages that have less significance and fewer sources, yet have stayed up without question. Finally, the editor noted that the flag was based on the other editor’s perceived lack of importance for the figure rather than the actual listed concern about lack of significant cited sources.

After the editor’s comment was published, the article received seven “keep” votes, which was enough to save it from being deleted. Editors who supported the page’s survival also expanded my initial paragraph, adding sources that provided more information about her career as well as honorary awards given in her name. Ms. Coates’ name was also added to the Wikidata database and added to the Wikilist *List of African-American Firsts*.

CONCLUSIONS

Wikipedia is only as objective as its most subjective editor. Pages that one editor feels are substantial and well documented may get flagged by another who believes it to be baseless and insignificant. Though there are guidelines for discerning notoriety, an editor’s personal bias and experience may quickly superimpose itself onto the page in question, as it happened with Elaine J. Coates. Thankfully, her page had many defenders and was able to stay rightfully intact, but this incident does call to attention the many pages detailing the deeds and accomplishments of other women of color which may have been deleted for similar prejudiced reasons.

The thinly veiled bias of editors is emboldened by the fact that so many Wikipedians are male-identifying, indeed, it is highly likely that every commenter on the Coates talk page was male.

Currently, only 17% of all biographies on Wikipedia are about women⁵. Archives and libraries, two career paths that are dominated by women, can help change this number by contributing their collections to the Wikiworld or by hosting Wikipedia Edit-a-thons that focus on creating new pages for women. Making women a more visible part of history is an important step for creating a more equitable and truthful space for us all.

REFERENCES

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